

(Non-)Knowledge, Political Economy and Trade Policy in Seventeenth-Century France: The Problem of Trade Balances

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Seventeenth-century trade policy is generally framed by historians within the historiographical paradigm of ‘mercantilism’.¹ For Adam Smith and many later theorists of this alleged economic ‘system’, its core was the balance of trade theory as depicted most famously by the Director of the English East India Company, Thomas Mun. In his 1664 posthumously published tract, *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade*, Mun developed the idea that it was essential for countries that the value of their exports be greater than that of their imports.² This seemed necessary in order to prevent an outflow of bullion which was thought to have deleterious consequences for a country's economic performance. According to the economic historian Charles Wilson, Mun's short tract, with its explanation of the balance of trade theory, became the ‘Bible of later mercantilists’.³ Following Wilson, every textbook puts the balance of trade theory at the center of economic thought and policy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

There has been a great deal of debate on the question of whether the balance of trade theory was as wrong and as ‘absurd’ as Adam Smith had it.⁴ But that is a problem of economic theory. It should suffice here to say that in an economy which was running on coined money, the preoccupation about there always being enough of it in the country was far from being as wrong-headed

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- 1 For a discussion of this paradigm, see e.g. Coleman D. C. (ed.), *Revisions in Mercantilism* (London: 1969); Magnusson L. (ed.), *Mercantilist Economics* (Boston: 1993); Stern Ph. – Wennerlind C. (eds.), *Mercantilism Reimagined. Political Economy in Britain and its Empire* (New York: 2014); Isenmann M. (ed.), *Mercantilismus. Wiederaufnahme einer Debatte* (Stuttgart: 2014).
 - 2 Mun T., *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade*, (repr. New York – London: 1895) 7.
 - 3 Wilson C., *Mercantilism* (London: 1958) 11.
 - 4 Smith A., *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, Strahan – Cadell: 1776).

as the Scottish moral philosopher wanted posterity to believe.⁵ The problem I want to address here concerns instead the practical role of the balance of trade theory during the seventeenth century, which is generally considered as the heyday of 'mercantilism'. However, being able to regulate trade according to trade balances would have required actually have access to knowledge of those balances. Yet for most of the seventeenth century, such comprehensive figures were not available. In England, the collection of trade data was regularized only in 1696, by the establishment of the Inspector Generalship of Customs, the General Register of Shipping, and the Board of Trade, the latter being pre-eminently an information gathering bureau.⁶ The French equivalent of the Board of Trade, the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce*, was established even later, in April 1713.⁷

From this somewhat odd contrast between the supposed centrality of the balance of trade theory and the actual absence of official trade balances, there arise two questions which I will address with particular regard to France. The first concerns the role of the balance of trade theory and of trade balances in a time when there were no official trade balances registered by governments. The second is: Why was the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce* established so late? Partly, this may be explained by administrative difficulties. During the *Ancien Régime*, France lacked a customs bureau, which made the collection of trade data extremely difficult. But the fact that this was also the case for the time following the ministry of Colbert (1661–1683) and his immediate successors, suggests there were additional reasons for its late institution. The hypothesis I want to venture in what follows is based on the assumption that 'knowledge' and 'ignorance' are not stable categories and that what is deemed relevant knowledge in trade depends largely on general assumptions about political economy. Trade balances, and specific knowledge about trade connected with them, became significant in France only with the demolition

5 See e.g. the discussion of the problem in Hutchison T., *Before Adam Smith: Emergence of Political Economy, 1662–1776* (Oxford: 1988) 150–155 and Rössner Ph., "Mercantilism as an Effective Ressource Management System. Money in the German Empire c. 1500–1800", in Isenmann (ed.), *Merkantilismus* 39–64.

6 Hoppit J., "Political Arithmetic in Eighteenth-Century England", *Economic History Review* 49, 3 (1996) 516–540. A recent overview of the concept's history and previous attempts to calculate trade balances in England is provided by Deringer W. P., *Calculated Values: The Politics and Epistemology of Economic Numbers in Britain, 1688–1738* (doctoral dissertation, University of Princeton 2012) 177–182.

7 Charles L. – Daudin G., "La collecte du chiffre au XVIII^e siècle: le Bureau de la balance du commerce et la production des données sur le commerce extérieur de la France", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 58, 1 (2011) 128–155.

of certain views on political economy which were at the core of the trade policy of Louis XIV's famous minister.

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For the time before the ministry of Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who was appointed *Intendant des finances* in 1661 and four years later became *Contrôleur général des finances* of the French kingdom, there exist only two trade balances, both of which dating from the second half of the 1640s. The first one was published in a tract with the title *The honourable Commerce*, by a certain Jean Eon, a Carmelite Monk, whose religious name was Mathias de St. Jean.⁸ In his bulky treatise, Eon did not use the notion of 'trade balance'. However, he compared imports and exports into and out of France, reaching detailed and rather pessimistic conclusions. Exports to the Netherlands, he held for example, amounted to 16,701,466 *livres*, while imports reached the volume of 21,445,520 *livres*, leaving France with a trade deficit of exactly 4,744,054 *livres*. Only slightly better was trade with England. Here, imports amounted to 15,372,000 *livres*, and exports reached 12,904,100 *livres*, resulting in a trade deficit of 2,467,900 *livres* for France. A quite different picture was drawn two years later in a pamphlet printed in Paris on behalf of the Parisian guild of the haberdashers (*merciers*).⁹ This pamphlet contained a list of 22 categories of goods, which Dutch and English merchants came every year to buy in France. The sum of all exports made up more than 38 million *livres*. The only foreign commodity listed—we will soon see why—were draperies, which did not amount to more than two or three million *livres*. Not very surprisingly, Eon and the *merciers* reached completely different conclusions. While Eon pleaded to free the kingdom from the alleged economic domination of foreign merchants, the *merciers* argued that trade connections with England and the Netherlands should not be disrupted

8 Eon J., *Le commerce honorable* (Nantes, Guillaume le Monnier: 1646) 28–43. Cf. Cole C. W., *Colbert and a Century of French Mercantilism*, vol. 1 (New York: 1939) 209–214. Eon was a protégé of the Maréchal de Mailleraie, Governor of the Bretagne and Cousin of Richelieu. See Sée H., "Le commerce des hollandais à Nantes pendant la minorité de Louis XIV", *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 41 (1926) 246–260.

9 BnF, Collection Morel de Thoisy, no. 72, fols. 327–329: "Raisons et Moyens contenus en la Requête présentée à la Cour par les Maistres & Gardes de la Marchandise de Mercerie, Grosserie, Joüaillerie de Paris". See also Morineau M., "La balance du commerce franco-néerlandais et le resserrement économique des Provinces-Unies au XVIII^{ème} siècle", *Economisch-Historisch Jaarboek* 30 (1965) 175–176.

or disturbed in any way. Otherwise, they maintained, many Frenchmen would lose their employment and would have to beg for bread in the streets.

How realistic were these calculations? Eon claimed that his statistics had been compiled on the basis of documents drawn from the customs bureaus of the most important French port cities. He claimed not to have taken only one year, but five, and calculated their average values. In addition, everything had been carefully examined by 'sincere and faithful persons who have the theory and practice of commerce'.¹⁰ The *merciers* equally referred to official documents. Their calculations, they held, could be easily verified by the registers of the tax farmers who had collected the import and export duties. However, in both cases there is no proof for the veracity of these claims. But this is a secondary question. Because, true or not, the French government itself did not possess the means to verify these calculations. There are no official trade balances or other statistics by the central administration for the years in question. And the very fact that the governments did not have available the statistical means to check the figures presented in these trade balances made it possible for particular groups to push trade policy in certain directions. Eon pursued a clear political agenda by publishing his tract. He was from the city of Nantes, where in the 1640s there was a profound frustration about the foreign (especially Dutch) dominance of local trade. The economic and political motives of the Parisian haberdashers are even more evident. In October 1648, the Parisian cloth manufacturers guild (*drapiers*) had taken advantage of the Crown's weakness caused by the *Fronde*, and, with the help of the *Parlement* of Paris, imposed an import prohibition on Dutch, English and Flemish woolen and silk cloth, arguing Dutch and English woolens took more than 20 million *livres* out of the country, draining France of its resources of gold and silver.¹¹ The guild of the *marchands merciers* were engaged in long distance trade between France and other countries, and their business interests were necessarily damaged by the import prohibition. Their decision to publish the list of exports was supposed to convince the public that unhampered commerce with England and the Netherlands was highly useful to the kingdom. The *merciers* feared

10 Eon, *Commerce honorable* 28–29. Morineau, "La balance du commerce franco-néerlandais" 173 thinks that being acquainted with high standing personalities linked to Richelieu Eon disposed of the means for such a work, which Morineau defines as 'technically possible'.

11 *Declaration du Roy, portant reglement sur le fait de la Iustice, Police, Finances, & soulagement des Subiects de Sa Majesté, verifiée en Parlement le vingt-quatrième iour d'Octobre mil six cent quarante-huict* (Paris, Imprimeurs & Libraires ordinaires du Roy: 1648) 11–2. Cf. Cole, *Colbert* vol. 1, 233.

reprisals from the English side, which actually came one year later, in October 1649, in form of an import prohibition of French woolens and silk as well as of all sorts of French wine.

Both trade balances became prominent again at the end of the 1650s, when the government in France, for the first time avoiding major military conflict after almost three decades, decided that the time had come to strengthen the kingdom's economy against foreign competition. In 1659, several chapters of the *Commerce honorable* were reprinted in Paris.¹² Among them was a chapter containing the negative trade balances compared with other European countries, as well as the proposition Eon had made to increase French shipping by declaring that exports out of the kingdom had to be carried exclusively by French ships. Such a decree was enacted on March 15, 1659 but, since France did not have the necessary number of ships at hand, for the meantime permits to export French goods on foreign ships were granted for a special tax of 50 *sous* per ton.¹³ The Estates General of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, who wanted the tax to be repealed because it threatened their cargo trade, sent a special embassy to Paris in autumn 1660 headed by Coenraad van Beuningen with the task of negotiating a commercial treaty between the two countries. From his very first talks with the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Brienne, however, van Beuningen understood that it would be very difficult to persuade the French to rescind the 'shipping money'. Thus, van Beuningen wrote to the Great Pensionary of Holland, Johan de Witt, that evidence was needed in order to prove to his French counterparts the usefulness of Dutch traders for their economy and to show how much France could be damaged by economic reprisals.¹⁴ He eventually presented therefore to the French government the very same list published by the *merciers* of Paris in 1648.¹⁵ It did not serve van Beuningen's purpose, however, and in fact seriously backfired. While the Dutch

12 *Extrait du livre intitulé Considerations politiques sur le Faict du Commerce de France. Composé par un Habitant de la Ville de Nantes & Imprimé en ladite Ville en 1646* (Paris, s.n.: 1659).

13 AN, Marine A1 5, fols. 175–177.

14 *Lettres et négociations entre Mr. Jean de Witt, conseiller pensionnaire & garde des sceaux des provinces de Hollande et de West-Frise, et Messieurs les Plenipotentiaires des Provinces Unies des Pais-Bas*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam, Janssons-Waesberge: 1725) 119–120.

15 The document can be found in AN, Marine, B7 486, fols. 257–260: "Avis que donnent les Marchands et Négociants de Paris, qui trafiquent dans les Pais d'Angleterre et Hollande pour faire voir qu'il est très important de maintenir et conserver la négociation réciproque" (wrongly dated to the later period of 1663 by a later hand). An English translation of a copy of the document preserved in the State Archives in Amsterdam is given in Rowen H. H. (ed.), *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times: a Documentary History*

diplomat had thought that the huge amount of French exports would prove the usefulness of free trade between the two countries, for many in the French administration, it proved only the benefit of the tax on foreign ships. This was because the greatest part of the products sold to the Dutch were not consumed in the Netherlands but re-exported to other countries. If this was done by the French themselves, the line of reasoning went, they would gain the profit for the carriage and could employ many people as seamen.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the list of the *merciers* was published again in 1669 in the fourth volume of Lieuwe van Aitzema's work on Dutch history, attributing it to Ambassador Willem Boreel, who, according to Aitzema, had allegedly sent it to the Estates General in 1658.¹⁷ This new list, however, bears the sign of Aitzema's editorial input. Now the whole 38 million of French exports were attributed to the Dutch alone, whereas the original document had spoken of exports to the Netherlands *and* England. This completely exaggerated version would again be used by the Dutch to exert pressure on the French envoy François de Callières, sent to The Hague in 1696.¹⁸ One year later Pierre-Daniel Huet, Archbishop of Avranches, reproduced these figures in his *Mémoires* on Dutch trade, which disseminated Dutch mercantile propaganda in France in the wake of the Peace of Rijswijk, obtaining enduring notoriety by the various editions of the *Mémoires* published throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁹

(New York: 1972) 162–4. See also idem, *John de Witt. Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672* (Princeton: 1978) 466.

- 16 See e.g. the memoir of the French diplomat Henri Brasset, who suspected the Dutch to be the original authors of the figures, in AAE, CP, Hollande 66, fols. 30–30v: 'Les Hollandois sont dans une forte impression d'estre necessaires à la France, en ce que son commerce en tire de grands avantages par le debit de ses marchandises et danrées, et voulurent en l'année 1648 en faire valoir l'importance lorsque les manufactures de laine de leur pays estant interdites en France, leurs marchands et correspondans exposèrent à la cour et au Parlement de Paris un memoire depuis imprimé et publié avec grande ostentation, portant que les Hollandois seuls en tiroient annuellement pour plus de trente millions de livres de danrées'.
- 17 Lieuwe van Aitzema, *Saken van Staet en Oorlogh* vol. 4 (The Hague, Johan Veely et al.: 1669) 290. Furthermore, it was inserted by the merchant Pieter de la Court, who had close ties with Johan de Witt, in several of his works. See therefore Morineau, "Le commerce franco-néerlandais" 175.
- 18 AAE, CP Hollande, 164, fols. 44–45.
- 19 AN, Marine, B7 463: *Mémoires touchant le commerce qui se fait a present dans les divers endroits du monde par raport aux Hollandois* (1697) 92. For Huet and the fortune of his *Mémoires* during the eighteenth century, see Cheney P., *Revolutionary Commerce. Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, Mass. – London: 2010) 28–30. The

Moreover, the influence of the list was not confined to the Netherlands. Two years after van Beuningen had presented it to the French government, in 1663, the English merchant, Samuel Fortrey, in a tract with the title *England's Interest and Improvement*, dedicated several pages to commerce with France.²⁰ The moment of publication was not fortuitous, for now the English were negotiating a commercial treaty with France. Fortrey deplored at length the 'vast sums of money the French yearly delude us of; either by such commodities as we may as well have of our own, or else by such others, as we might as well in great part be without: whereby no doubt our treasure will be soon exhausted, and the people ruined'. The proof for this assertion was supposedly to be found in a catalogue of French goods exported to England 'delivered in to the King of France, upon a designe he had to have forbidden the trade between France and England; supposing the value of English commodities sent into France, did surmount the value of those that were transported hither'. This 'catalogue' to which Fortrey referred was nothing other than the list published by the *merciers* of Paris fifteen years before. As Aitzema omitted the English contribution to French exports listed in the original document, so Fortrey did with the Dutch, coming up with a huge trade deficit on the English side:

So as by this calculation, it doth appear, that the yearly value of such commodities as are transported from *France* to *England*, amount to above six and twenty hundred thousand pounds. And the commodities exported out of England into France [...] do not amount to above ten hundred thousand pounds a year. By which it appears that our trade with France, is at least sixteen hundred thousand pounds a year, clear lost to this kingdom.²¹

Fortrey not only left out the Dutch contribution to French exports, grossly distorting the proportions of Anglo-French trade. He also changed or completely misinterpreted the context of the import prohibition against English and Dutch textiles, as he continued:

"mémoire de l'ambassadeur Boreel" was still quoted in Arnould Ambroise M., *De la Balance du Commerce et des relations commerciales extérieures de la France, dans toutes les parties du Globe*, vol. 1 (Paris, François Buisson: 1791) 185.

20 Fortrey S., *England's Interest and Improvement. Consisting in the Increase of the Store, and Trade of this Kingdom* (Cambridge, John Field: 1663).

21 Fortrey, *England's Interest* 24–25.

Whereby the King of France, finding it would prove to his loss, to forbid the trade with England, soon laid aside the designe; however raised the customs of some of our English commodities, by which means the vent of those commodities is very much lessened and hindred.²²

The import prohibition had not been an initiative of the French king, but had instead been imposed on the Crown by a particular merchant lobby in a moment of political weakness. Furthermore, the rise in import duties decreed by Mazarin and Superintendent of Finances Fouquet in 1654, to which Fortrey referred, was not an economic measure directed against England, but a fiscal device intended to raise money for the ongoing war against Spain.²³ In Restoration England, where hostility to France was constantly growing and merchant lobbies besieged the throne of Charles II,²⁴ the interpretation that the French king was pursuing a beggar—thy—neighbor policy fell on open ears. In fact, Fortrey's tract may have played a certain role in making the English position during the negotiations with France extremely rigid.²⁵

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The origins as well as the afterlife of the haberdashers' list of exports show that rather than solid 'knowledge' of trade balances, 'ignorance' or uncertainty of the real economic facts was the true driving force behind trade policies during the seventeenth century. For the English case, the famous *Scheme of Trade*, published in 1674 when the government intended to take up negotiations for a commercial treaty with France again, constitutes another example

²² Ibidem 25.

²³ Dareste A. C., "Traites et droits de douanes dans l'ancienne France", *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 8 (1847) 476. The mistake made by Fortrey can be found also in recent works. See, e.g. Rothkrug L., *Opposition to Louis XIV. The Political and Social Origins of the French Enlightenment* (Princeton: 1964) 184.

²⁴ See Rommelse G., *The Second Anglo-Dutch War, 1665–1667. Raison d'état, Mercantilism and Maritime Strife* (Hilversum: 2006) 50–65.

²⁵ The negotiations during the years 1663–4 ended in failure, as would those of the years 1669–72. On the Anglo-French negotiations of these years see Alimento A., "Commercial treaties and the harmonisation of national interests: The Anglo-French case (1667–1713)", in Eadem (ed.), *War, Trade and Neutrality. Europe and the Medierranean in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Milan: 2010) 107–128; Isenmann M., "War Colbert ein 'Merkantilist'?", in Idem (ed.), *Merkantilismus* 143–167.

of merchant lobbies trying to influence the English government by publishing a negative trade balance with France.²⁶

But how did the situation evolve in France during the reign of Louis XIV? As has been shown most recently by Jacob Soll and Marie-Laure Legay, with the rise to power of Jean-Baptiste Colbert in the financial administration, there was an intensified effort to gather information about administrative and financial issues in France.²⁷ To some extent, the same effort can be observed with regard to international trade.²⁸ Since the early 1660s, the government tried, for example, to acquire precise knowledge about the number of merchant ships lying in French ports. Furthermore, the royal intendants, upon leaving the province of the French kingdom they had been in charge of, were asked to submit reports on the overall state of their provinces including matters of trade. Colbert also seems to have been interested in calculating the imports into France of products which hindered the sale of similar French products. In 1662 he calculated that the import of fish, stockings, woolens and silk textiles amounted to almost 20 million *livres*.²⁹ One year later, in 1663, Colbert started to annually collect quantitative data from the tax farmers (*fermiers*), to whom the import and export duties were farmed out. On the basis of these data, Colbert compiled alphabetical registers in which he listed the quantity of several goods imported as well as of certain French goods exported. In 1693, however, Director of Commerce, Henri d'Aguesseau, commented on these lists as follows:

For administering trade there is nothing as important as having exact and faithful records of all the commodities that enter and leave the kingdom and to compare these two sets of figures every year. I thought that I could

26 *A Scheme of Trade, As it is present Carried on Between England and France, In the Commodities of the Native Product and Manufacture of each Country; Calculated as exactly as possible, in Obedience to the Command of the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners for the Treaty of Commerce with France: And humbly tender'd to their Lordships* (s.l., s.n.: 1674). For a discussion of the *Scheme of Trade* see also Priestley M., "Anglo-French Trade and the 'Unfavourable Balance' Controversy, 1660–1685", *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. 4 (1951) 37–52. Already one year before, also Fortrey's tract had been re-published.

27 Soll J., *The Information Master. Jean-Baptiste Colbert's Secret State Information System* (Ann Arbor: 2009) and Legay M.-L., *La banqueroute de l'État royal. La gestion des finances publiques de Colbert à la Révolution française* (Paris: 2011).

28 Meyer J., *Colbert* (Paris: 1982) 221–6; Hooock J., "Le monde marchand face au défi colbertien. Le cas de Rouen", in Isenmann, *Merkantilismus* 224–227 with further literature.

29 Colbert J.-B., *Lettres, instructions et mémoires de Colbert*, ed. P. Clément, vol. 2.1 (Paris: 1863) cclxix.

find the information I needed in the alphabetical tables which the late Monsieur Colbert had taken care to compile and which have been continued also following his death. Having examined them, however, they seemed almost useless for my aims [...].³⁰

Four of these tables have survived in the National Archives of Paris.³¹ They are sometimes briefly mentioned in literature, but have never been closely analyzed. It seemed obvious that if Colbert had ordered such tables, he had done so in light of the balance of trade theory. Thomas Schaeper writes, for instance, 'in 1664 Colbert ordered the tax farmers charged with customs duties to draw up and submit to him alphabetized tables of all exports and imports. Armed with this information, he hoped to be better able to determine if France was buying more than it was selling abroad. Nothing much resulted from this project, however, [...].'³²

The lists contained the following information: In the first column on the left the products were indicated. Moving to the right, a series of customs bureaus in various parts of France were listed, where these products entered the country with the respective quantity of the product, indicated either by the number of pieces or by its weight. In the last column on the right the total quantity of the product was noted, again either by the number of pieces or its weight. Examining the structure of these lists, there are several omissions which at first sight seem to justify d'Aguesseau's and Schaeper's skeptical assessments. Supposing that commerce should be regulated according to trade balances, one can easily understand why d'Aguesseau found these lists fairly useless. Firstly, the product description is very rudimentary. Secondly, the price for which these products were sold is missing, as well as the value of imports. Thirdly, the country of origin is not mentioned.³³ In addition, the commodities included in

30 AN, G7 n. 211: 'Il n'y a rien de si necessaire Monsieur pour conduire le commerce que d'avoir des estats exacts et fideles de toutes les entrées et sorties du Royaume et de les comparer d'année en année. J'avois crû pouvoir trouver les éclaircissemens que je desirois sur cela dans les tables alphabetiques que feu M. Colbert a pris soin de faire dresser et qui ont esté continuées depuis sa mort, mais comme apres les avoir examinées elles m'ont parû presque inutiles pour la fin que je me proposois, [...]'. Cf. Biollay L., *Études économiques sur le XVIII^e siècle. Le Pacte de famine. L'Administration du Commerce* (Paris: 1885) 485–486.

31 AN, F12 1834. The years preserved are 1669, 1671, 1672 and 1683.

32 Schaeper T. J., *The French Council of Commerce, 1700–1715. A Study of Mercantilism after Colbert* (Columbus: 1983) 194.

33 One item, for example, is "Draps façon d'Angleterre, d'Hollande et d'Espagne", whose import was indicated only by the total number, without specifying how many draperies came from each of these countries.

the list were far from representing the totality of wares imported into France. The list contained only goods which could be produced in France as well, such as textiles, steel and fish. Others, such as spices for example, which had to be imported in any case, were not mentioned. The most puzzling omission, however, is that of exports. The only items listed are wine, brandy and vinegar exported from Nantes, La Rochelle, Tonne-Charente, Bordeaux and Bayonne. Also here it is not clear to which country they were bound.

If Colbert's goal had been—as Schaeper maintains—to 'determine if France was buying more than it was selling abroad', the failure of his efforts could have hardly been more complete. In fact, these lists have nothing to do with a trade balance as shown by the *Scheme of Trade* or by the tables of bilateral trade which the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce* would compile after 1713 and which d'Aguesseau wanted to have already in the 1690s. However, there is evidence that contradicts the view that Colbert had failed to gather the knowledge he wanted to have or that the lists were 'incomplete' as L. Biollay holds.³⁴ This is because the structure of these lists remained the exact same from 1663 to Colbert's death in 1683. Of course, collecting precise data from the tax farmers was not an easy task, especially as France during the *Ancien Régime* lacked a customs administration. Considering Colbert's ordinary obstinacy, however, it is safe to say that he would have tried to get additional information if what was contained in these lists did not seem sufficient to him. Apparently, he had considered himself reasonably well informed by these lists for two decades. The reason for the fact that d'Aguesseau thought to the contrary, that they did not contain the necessary knowledge for the proper conduct of trade, is rather to be explained by a substantial difference between their general assumptions of political economy and, therefore, of the kind of information and knowledge considered necessary for the conduct of trade.

Colbert's trade policy has been considerably distorted. It never was the economic war conducted with purely economic means as was depicted by his eighteenth-century detractors and later historians.³⁵ The French *Contrôleur général* believed that there was a 'natural share' of world commerce belonging to each country according to its economic potential. In the relationship

34 Biollay, *Études économiques* 485.

35 For the following, see Isenmann, "War Colbert ein 'Merkantilist'?" Idem, "Égalité, réciprocité, souveraineté. The Role of Commercial Treaties in Colbert's Economic Policy", in Alimento A. – Stapelboek K. (eds.), *The Politics of Commercial Treaties in the Eighteenth Century—Balance of Power, Balance of Trade* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan: forthcoming). The standard view on Colbert's economic and trade policy is summed up for example by Jacquart J., "Colbert", in Méchoulan H. – Cornette J. (eds.), *L'État classique. Regards sur la pensée politique de la France dans le second XVII^e siècle* (Paris: 1996) 181–199.

between different countries, this 'natural order' should be preserved and made possible by the observation of a set of precise rules and principles, which Colbert tried to make other nations accept. These principles were comprised of the non-discrimination between natives and foreigners with regard to import and export duties ('national treatment' in modern terminology),³⁶ the most-favored nation principle, the sovereign right to lower or raise customs and, finally, 'free trade' in the sense that everyone was allowed to impose on foreign commodities the import duties he wanted, but that there should be no import prohibitions. All these principles should serve to establish fair competition between the different countries and, what was equally important, competition based on the quality of products and not on their price. Everyone could keep his country free of cheap imports by raising import duties. But it should not be forbidden for inhabitants to buy high quality products when they were disposed to pay a higher price for them as for similar native commodities.

Colbert did not reason in the terms of the balance of trade theory. The lists he had compiled, in addition to his keeping track of the exchange rates between different countries, served only as a very approximate check of whether his policy was working or not—a policy however, which was not deduced from this information, but was conducted first and foremost on the aforementioned principles. If these principles were observed, Colbert thought, there was no question at all that France would sell more abroad than buy from other nations. The wealth of natural resources in France was incomparably greater than that of all neighboring countries. In addition, Colbert could not see why French artisans should make products inferior to those of the English or the Dutch. To the contrary, if the strict regulation of quality he imposed on French manufacturers were observed, French products would not have to fear any competition abroad.³⁷

36 The only notable exceptions to this rule was the aforementioned tax of 50 sous per ton on foreign ships, which was, however, justified by the exclusion of French ships from ports outside Europe and similar taxes existing in other countries. For Levantine trade, it was substituted in 1669 by a 20 percent duty on all goods shipped to Marseille in vessels which were not "French". See Zwierlein C., *Imperial Unknowns. The French and British in the Mediterranean 1650–1750* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2016) chapter 1.

37 On quality standards and controls in France, see especially Ph. Minard, *La fortune du colbertisme. Etat et industrie dans la France des Lumières* (Paris: 1998); Idem, "Normes et qualité dans l'industrie textile française au XVIII^e siècle", in Stanziani A., *La qualité des produits en France, XVIII^{ème}–XX^{ème} siècles* (Paris: 2003) 69–89. Furthermore, see Grenier J.-Y., *L'économie d'Ancien Régime. Un monde de l'échange et de l'incertitude* (Paris: 1996) 63–70.

However, the problem was that, during his ministry, Colbert did not succeed in imposing his general principles on France's two major competitors, England and the Netherlands. As a reaction to Colbert's tariff list of 1667, which raised duties on the import of many commodities, both countries resorted to the discrimination or even to the complete ban of French products, making Colbert's policy obsolete. The failure of Colbert's 'natural order' led to a situation in which the kind of knowledge Colbert had thought sufficient for conducting foreign trade in the eyes of many turned into ignorance. It was felt that more and different knowledge was needed. Already in July 1686, the Director general of Commerce, Jean-Baptiste de Lagny, wrote to an agent of the farming syndicate that there existed a plan 'to make a general table for the King of what we receive from foreigners and what we give, classified by nations, by quality, type and price'.³⁸ New conflicts over tariffs with the Netherlands and England caused by a tax increase for the import of several commodities into France in 1687 and the beginning of the Nine Years War, which put the kingdom in dire economic straits, made the possibility of obtaining precise trade balances seem all the more necessary. The tax farmers were therefore given, in 1693, new orders to compile lists, which would possess 'a greater extension than have had the orders of late M. Colbert, the changes in commerce and in the administration of customs requiring more precise knowledge (*connoissances*) in order to evaluate the effect of the measures taken since 1687'.³⁹

D'Aguesseau and de Lagny thus initiated a process leading (after many difficulties) eventually to the establishment, in 1713, of the *Bureau de la Balance du Commerce*, which collected a wide range of information throughout the eighteenth century and built up new knowledge about international trade that came to serve as the guideline for French trade policy.⁴⁰ Colbert, on the contrary, had taken the opposite path. He would have instead agreed with

38 Rothkrug, *Opposition to Louis XIV* 220.

39 On the initiatives taken in 1693, see AN, G7 1685, n. 211 and 212; AN, Marine, B7 63. Detailed particular trade balances for the port city of Bayonne for the years 1695–98 can be found in AN, F12 1834.

40 Schaeper, *French Council of Commerce* 193–196. Both the principle of the necessity of a positive balance of trade and the necessary knowledge were further underscored at the beginning of the eighteenth century by some members of the new *Conseil de commerce*, established in November 1700, such as Jean Anisson, deputy of the city of Lyon. See e.g. BnF, Ms. fr. 14294, fol. 19. The final stimulus to implement the *Bureau de la Balance de Commerce* would be provided by the Anglo-French negotiations for a commercial treaty in 1713, in which the French negotiators had the feeling that their English counterparts were considerably better informed on the state and evolution of their trade. See Daudin – Charles, "La collecte du chiffre au XVIII^e siècle" 128–129.

Sir Josiah Child and his reflections on the balance of trade. Being extremely skeptical that it was possible to calculate the value of imports and exports properly at all, the English economist concluded in his *New Discourse of Trade*:

[...] tho' the Study of the *Ballance of Trade* [...] be a Study very Ingenious and Commendable, yet, in my poor Opinion, the inquiry, whether we get or lose, doth not so much deserve our greatest pains and care, as how we may be sure to get, the former being of no use but in order to the latter.⁴¹

4

The problem of the balance of trade in theory and practice during the seventeenth century, upon which this brief sketch has attempted to shed some light without any claims of being exhaustive, confronts the historian with various forms of 'ignorance'. The sociology of ignorance has elaborated a set of notions to distinguish between different manifestations of ignorance: unconscious ignorance is denoted with the terms of 'nescience' or 'unspecific ignorance', while 'non-knowledge' indicates the same phenomenon after an epistemic shift by which actors have defined the knowledge they thought they were lacking. Close to conscious and unconscious ignorance, but not identical with them for they contain a voluntary element, are the categories of 'willful and unwilling ignorance'.⁴² Taking this terminology as a point of reference, the first case presented could be described as a particular case of 'nescience'. The veracity of the national trade balances we possess for this period is in general doubtful. Still, the individuals in question did not scrutinize their validity, because their function was above all discursive. Their veracity just did not matter. Sometimes there is even evidence for a more or less voluntary distortion of figures, in which case 'nescience' shifts towards 'willful ignorance'. Often, however, the boundaries between these different forms of ignorance were blurred, for there always remains some portion of ignorance on the part of the historian about historical actors' actual intentions. Still following the sociological grammar of ignorance, in the second case one could say that there took place an epistemic

41 Child J., *A New Discourse of Trade* (London, T. Sowle: 1698) 167. Child's treaty was well known in eighteenth-century France, and his skepticism was shared, for example, by Melon Jean-François, *Essai politique sur le commerce*, 2nd ed. (s.l., s.n.: 1736) 265–292.

42 See Zwierlein C., "Towards a History of Ignorance", this volume.

shift leading from 'nescience' or 'unspecific ignorance' to 'non-knowledge'. A kind of knowledge Colbert had considered as sufficient in order to conduct trade, in the eyes of his successors became inadequate and therefore called for additional information.

In this latter case, however, the sociological language seems less useful to me from a heuristic point of view, since it entails necessarily anachronism, as Colbert's knowledge is judged from an ex-post perspective. It is rather important to note, in my view, that Colbert deliberately chose a certain kind of knowledge in light of his ideas about political economy and only different views on political economy turned his knowledge into 'non-knowledge'. As far as not only the history of ignorance, but the history of trade policy in the seventeenth century, is concerned, it can be concluded that trade balances did actually play an important role, but not in the way it is generally supposed. Both cases complicate considerably the view presented by the master narrative of 'mercantilism' which conceives of trade policy as rational and uniformly driven by the balance of trade theory. The history of political economy and of economic policy would certainly benefit in general from taking the category, and the different forms of ignorance which were also shaping trade policy, more closely into account.

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